The Ozarks – A Geographic History

The Ozark Plateau is the largest land area in Missouri covering land from the Missouri river south to the border of Arkansas and east to the boot heel. The highest point in Missouri is located in this region, Taum Sauk Mountain which rises to 1,772 feet above sea level. The land is rich in lead and zinc and the soil is conducive to growing many fruits such as strawberries. Several large lakes were created in this area by building dams across the White and Black rivers. One of these, the Lake of the Ozarks has become one of the most popular tourist destinations in this state. The region is also known for its karst topography; numerous caves are beneath the surface, many of which have been turned into tourist sites such as Marble Cave and Bridal Cave.

Most of these caves are the sites of local legends and lore. Jesse James and his gang are said to have used Meramec Caverns in the 1870s as a hideout after train and bank robberies because it was large enough to hold both men and horses. Ballroom dances were held here in the 1900s as well. A tuberculosis sanitarium was built in Mammoth Cave, three hundred feet underground in the early nineteen hundreds in hopes that cave air would hold healing properties.

The area is particularly scenic, filled with streams, mineral springs, low mountains and forests. High rocky bluffs rise precipitously on the Mississippi river, to a height of 150 feet above the water, and continue from the mouth of the Meramec to St. Genevieve. There are many waterways in this area that are used for floating and fishing, such as the St. Francis, the Current and Black Rivers. In addition, the age and physiographic characteristics of the Ozarks make it the region with the greatest species diversity in Missouri.

The area was originally settled by Osage Indians and later by French traders and trappers. The origin of the name Ozarks is said to be a corruption of “Aux Arc,” the name of a French trading post built here in the 1700s. Daniel Boone, George Washington Carver and Harry Truman all lived for a time in the Ozarks. Today the Ozarks are mostly rural in character but have grown tremendously with the development of large tourism centers.